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AUTHOR King, Martha L.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Language research over the past two decades has revealed that language is not something children "acquire," but rather a system they build. A key factor in this linguistic construction is children's interaction with parents or other caregivers. The studies reveal further that children's repeated interactions with books and stories and their concepts about print on entry to school are also factors in their success in learning to read by the time they reach seven years of age. Most striking in all of this research is the active role children play in their own learning. They discover, hypothesize, test, approximate, invent, and correct their utterances and intentions on the basis of their interactions with more knowledgeable and skilled partners. The purpose for action, the relationships among participants, and the particular roles people play, all influence the language and learning that occur. Consequently, teachers and administrators should work together to create learning environments that encourage children to collaborate in exploring ideas and thus in developing mathematical, scientific, and literary concepts alongside social linguistic skills. (HOD)

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Language Learning As Learning How to Mean:

Implications for Practice from Selected Language Research

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Martha L. King, Deborah Thompson,

Marilyn Chi and Susan Lehr

The Ohio State University

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A major assumption underlying this paper is that language is central to all of the activities we associate with schooling and therefore merits greater consideration in curriculum planning, administration and classroom teaching than it currently receives. The abundant language research over the past two decades has valuable implications for teaching; yet the impact on schools has been disappointing. While some teachers are currently incorporating new knowledge about language into their teaching (for example, in the way they interpret children's early writing errors or mistakes in reading), many take up innovations that are contrary to recent findings of language studies. And others appear to be unaware of or misunderstand the implications of the new information. It is not uncommon, for example, for first grade teachers to ask children to "practice" answering questions in complete sentences, when an abbreviated form of "Yes" or "Sometimes" would be the natural way to respond.

There are many and varied reasons of course for the discrepancy between what is known about language and what is practiced in education. They range from the usual causes of the lag between research and practice in teaching to a very fundamental fact: ideas about language and learning are extremely complex, often difficult to implement, and in most instances, require global rather than piecemeal translation. The teacher must not only be knowledgeable about research findings, but must also select from and interpret those findings in a way that makes sense to her in her teaching situation. So the knowledge that may hold the greatest promise for benefiting children's learning may be the most difficult to implement.

In this paper we will consider selected aspects of language research

which we believe that, if adequately utilized, could have far reaching influence on education from nursery school to graduate education. Ideally, teachers should understand language itself in terms of its formal systems of sounds, meaning, words and grammar. Such knowledge could help them respond more intelligently to children's reading as well as guide their interpretation of children's spelling and writing and could enhance their teaching of many aspects of language from grammar to poetry. The focus of this paper, however, is on research related to language learning and use in the social world, particularly the world of the classrom. We will consider the language learning process, the crucial role of social interaction in constructing a system of language and meanings, and the influence of situational contexts on language learning and use.

The Purposeful Systematic Nature of Language Learning

A most significant outcome of Chomsky's work and the research that followed in its wake was the break with behaviorists' views and the concept that language learning is a dynamic creative process. Chomsky portrayed human beings as having a special language competence - a competence that enables them to learn an abstract set of rules that underly language structure and employ them to generate an infinite number of sentences. Chomsky's theory highlighted linguistic form - the phonology, morphology and syntax of the system - and yet emphasiszed the creative aspects of language production. The studies that emanated from this work documented the way children learn the system of formal structures by abstracting rules from the language they hear and applying

them in their own verbal constructions. Investigations by Brown, Bellugi, Berko-Gleason, Cazden and others in the sixties and seventies showed that children go about learning their native language in a highly systematic way. Their learning is more than imitation or a partial rendering of adult speech. Rather children appear to learn elements of language in ways strikingly similar across children, yet which are at times, quite different from adult usage. In learning particular features - noun and verb endings, for example, children tend to follow a procedure in which they first use adult forms correctly, i.e., they say _feet_ , _mice_ , _went_ , _came_ or _ran_ . But they then go through a stage in which they _overgeneralize_ the rules that govern noun and verb inflections and produce such forms as _foots_ , _mouses_ , _goed_ , _comed_ or _runned_ . This process of overgeneralizing the rules of the language system to features where they don't apply operates across many aspects of oral language and shows up in their writing as well. When children first learn to segment sentences with periods or commas, for example, they tend to over-apply the punctuation marks and often put a period at the end of each line and sprinkle commas abundantly throughout their texts.

Much of this early learning is tacit; children know and apply a great deal about language that they are not able to explain. Their earliest writings are rich in invented spellings indicating an underlying knowledge of phonology, which children use to create their own unique spelling system. They focus on the most salient features of phonology, the consonants and tense (long) vowels, and generate unique forms, such as DA (day), SKL (school) and BABE (baby) before moving to the

conventional forms of adult spelling. Read, (1971, 1975) emphasizes that these early inventions are rule governed and predictable.

Children employ what they know to convey meaning. Sometimes they persist in applying their personal rule systems despite repeated exposure to the correct adult forms. Jean Berko-Gleason (Cazden, 1969) asked children in the first three grades of school to respond in statements using irregular forms of nouns and past tense of verbs after she had given the correct form in her questions. In first grade, one-half of the children, after hearing the correct form of rang in a statement, "The bell rang yesterday," answered her question with, "The bell ringed ...." In her conclusions, Gleason emphasized that children were paying attention to the sense of what was being said and producing forms dictated by their own linguistic systems and not by imitation .

Language Learning Is a Constructive Process

Since the early sixties language research has washed ashore in great waves. The first focus was on structure and learning language was perceived as 'acquiring syntactic structures.' The next wave emphasized semantics and the crucial role of context in interpreting the child's syntax and meaning. Lois Bloom's work in 1970 signaled a shift toward studying language in the environment in which it occurred. Her now classic example of "Mommy sock" dramatized the importance of the surrounding situation, as well as, the child's intonation when interpreting the potential meanings of a two word utterance.

Interaction with adults. By the mid-seventies language was no longer viewed as something children "acquired," but rather as a system that they

built . A key factor in this linguistic construction was the chid's interaction with parents (or other caregivers). Bruner's (1975) research with infants and mothers indicates that the process is far from one in which the child simply imitates the adult. In fact, systematic observations revealed that the adult was constantly following and interpreting the child's own initiations, and reflecting them back to him in related words and actions. Bruner demonstrated how ordinary rituals of feeding, dressing and bathtime play provided rich opportunities for the child and parent to build a language together while engaged in joint endeavors. Bruner noted that mothers essentially respond to infants in two ways. First they interpret the child's intention to carry out some action and support that intention. They enter the action, according to Bruner, "to assist or reciprocate or 'scaffold' the action (p.12). They offer the help needed to provide a secure structure so that the child can achieve what he or she is not able to do alone. A second mode of interpretation is concerned with attention in which the mother follows the child's gaze, or solicits the child's interest and helps the child to find out about something and often includes identifying and naming objects. Central to the process is, of course, the presence of "an interpreting adult who operates not so much as a corrector or reinforcer as a provider, an expander, an idealizer of utterances while interacting with the child (p.17)."

Learning how to mean. What children learn in the early encounters with parents is more than words and principles for making grammatical constructions: they learn a system for making and sharing meanings. Learning is greater of course when children are supported by caring

adults who share their world with them and enter the children's worlds of play and talk, tuning into and responding to their feelings and experiences. Language experiences within the family and cultural group vary, but the learning process - the meaning sharing and interaction - is the same across children. As Halliday (1975) especially has made clear, they learn language as they use it to fulfill personal purposes. Even before they have words, infants learn the intentions of others in the context of familiar events (McNamara, 197a2). And they use a repertoire of sounds and gestures/actions to express meaning in which the verbal and nonverbal are intermingled (Garnica, 1975; Halliday, 1975). Halliday maintains that children learn their mother tongue by mastering certain language functions and developing a range of meanings within each. Their first fragile system is a protogrammar of four language functions that enables them to 1) relate to others, an interactional function; 2) get the things they need and want, an instrumental function; 3) influence the behavior of themselves and others, a regulatory function; and 4) reveal themselves, a personal function. When they learn words, they can use language to serve in new ways: to imagine, to find out (a heuristic function) and to inform others. With the rapid growth in vocabulary that occurs during the second year, there is a consolidation of the early functions into two superordinate functions: viz. to relate to others, a pragmatic function and to learn, a mathetic function. As uses of language within these two categories continue to expand and talk becomes a major channel of communication between children and adults, children begin to develop syntactic structures to fulfill their growing needs.

Extended dialogue, in which children and adults collaborate to share

meanings about everyday happenings, a book, an event or feelings, is extremely important at this time when children are moving toward the adult system of language. Cazden's work with preschoolers (1966) revealed that engaging children in meaningful talk stimulates language growth more rapidly than mirroring a child's language in correct form. The focus is on meaning rather than on the form of language itself.

Being able to construct an oral text , a coherent conversation, with another person is an essential part of the adult linguistic system which entails using language with appropriate grammatical forms and words that may be outside of the immediate context (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). The adult system encompasses the earlier categories of functions - (1) for learning or thinking, organizing and expressing ideas and (2) the interpersonal function, for relating to others, and also includes a third, a textual function. This refers to the language resources for creating oral or written texts to represent meanings intended by a speaker or writer (Halliday, 1975). The degree to which children are disposed to use a wide range of functions is related to the experiences they have and their opportunity to share experiences and negotiate meanings in interactions with adults. The quality of the interaction is governed by the extent to which adults pay attention to and extend the child's ideas and interests. Wells (1981) study of 128 children in Bristol, England documented in detail the significant features of parent-child interactions and constrasted conversations that facilitated learning with those that were less successful. Differences were associated with the parents' general attitudes toward child-rearing, the nature of the child's personality, the tendency of the mother to follow

the child's interests or pursue her own and the degree to which she corrected the child's speech or the information offered (Wells,1980).

Wells and his colleagues studied children from 15 months through the third year in school and were able to identify the particular features of adult-child interaction that were likely to predict future success in school. From one study the investigator concluded that it is the length of the conversation sequences and kind of feedback adults give children that makes the difference. Apparently, the sustained discourse with parents, even though replies are brief, develops levels of comprehension that facillitates their entry into reading (Evans, 1977). The studies revealed further that children's repeated interactions with books and stories, and their concepts about print, on entry to school were also factors in their success in learning to read by the time they reached seven years.

Most striking in all of this research is the active role children play in their own learning. They discover, hypothesize, test, approximate, invent and correct their utterances and intentions on the basis of the their interactions with more knowledgeable and skilled partners. There is ample evidence that children in several areas of language learning first develop their own system and structures and later take on the conventional system. According to Halliday, children invent two grammars, based on functions, before they take on the adult system. Read (1975) and Henderson (1980) report a similar phenomenon in spelling and word knowledge. Children invent ways of representing sounds in words that are not adult-like, but are logica and predictable before they learn the standard spellings. Clay (1975) and Ferreiro (1980) found that children

use similarly unique concepts or principles to guide their early attempts in writing. All of these studies illustrate the children have creative skill and tremendous capacity for learning.

The Contexts in which Language Is Learned and Used.

Since language is learned in social interactions within the family and speech community, children acquire the culture of that social group as well as their way of talking. They learn what is appropriate to talk about and how and when to do so. They learn values and beliefs and develop expectations for others that may be unique to that cultural and linguistic group. The ability to use situationally appropriate language is termed communicative competence (Hymes, 1971). This competence underlies the speaker's interactions with peers and others. It is a challenge to all children's communcative competence to master the demands of the classroom with its specialized vocabulary, power hierarchy and social functions. This challenge is especially demanding to those whose home language is most unlike that of school, i.e., the poor. Thus the classroom with its own unique "communicative context" may conflict or overlap with specific styles acquired in the home setting.

Susan Philips (1972), in a penetrating study of Warm Springs Indian children, called attention to the problems children from minority cultures often face when they are expected to follow communication patterns in school that differ substantially from those that they have learned to use in their homes. The problem at Warm Springs was not due primarily to language, because the children spoke English, but stemmed

from interference created by the discrepancies in the patterns of communication in the children's homes and those used in school. The children's response was to become increasingly silent the longer they stayed in school.

In the Kamahameha project in Hawaii, educators, psychologists and anthropologists are working to find ways to change conditions in schools to make patterns of communication congruent with those the minority Hawaiian children are accustomed to using. They have instituted opportunities for children to learn through observation, group talk and peer work groups and have decreased the amount of direct teacher instruction and individual pupil recitation. As a result, reading scores of the Hawaiian children have improved.

Another encouraging story comes from the research of Shirley Brice Heath (1983) who worked in the Piedmont Carolinas with teachers as a research partner to learn how children's performance in school could be improved by making learning conditions in school more consistent with the patterns of interaction and child rearing in their homes. Heath had previously lived and studied three very different communities in the region to learn how, where, when, to whom and with what results children were socialized as talkers, readers and writers. Although the communities were located only a few miles apart, adults had different ways of using language and communicating with their children. In one situation, parents believed they needed to teach their children to talk and set about doing it directly, e.g., they labeled items and asked questions such as, "Where is your nose?" In another community, adults immersed their children in an on-going stream of talk from extended family members, friends and

neighbors. With the background of Heath's in-depth study,the teacher-researchers studied patterns of communication in their own homes and the instructional situations in their classrooms. They found that from first grade reading groups to upper primary social studies group work, the major activity was producing some sort of commentary on events or objects. This kind of talk was more like that experienced in some homes than others. As teachers studied the patterns of interaction in their classrooms and related them to the children's customary way of communicating, they made changes to give children practice in those language uses not acquired at home. The result, according to Heath, was an increase in all kinds of talk - focused talk, labeling, stories and narratives- and the classrooms increasingly drew on the home life of the students, teachers and even visitors to the classroom.

The demands on children's linguistic ability often differ as the context of the classroom tasks change. Bernstein (1972) found that mainstream children told stories that were more decontextualized than those of working class children. His elaborated and restricted codes explain ways of describing language-in-use as determined by the role relationships of the speakers. The distance the narrator is from his tale and audience decides whether the language to be used will be an elaborated or restricted code. If a child feels a closeness and shared context with his audience, less elaboration is needed. This important factor is sometimes overlooked when children make up or retell stories in school.

Michaels' (1980) study children's oral narratives during sharing time illustrates how children's discourse styles vary and are received

differently by their teacher. Sharing time is well established in many elementary classrooms as a time when children can tell something that is important to them. Michaels found that children from minority cultures used distinctly different discourse styles in telling stories from those used by children from mainstream culture. Where a child from mainstream culture gave narratives that the teacher could extend through use of appropriate questions, a culturally different child gave an extended more rambling narrative that the teacher often interrupted at inappropriate times. If the child did not make connections within the narrative that showed how the parts were related, he or she was interrupted, with instructions from the teacher to tell only those things that were important. These attempts by the teacher to restructure the child's narrative usually resulted in the child's giving abbreviated answers or ceasing altogether. Efforts by the teacher to restructure the children's styles resulted in the students' trying to satisfy the teachers' requests to tell only the important things and still retain the styles that were most familiar to them.

The culture of the classroom hinges on the delicate balance between those things deemed important for future success and those things that make the students feel good about themselves. That delicate balance can be upset when instructional attention is focused on aligning the culturally different student with the cultural mainstream. For many dialect and bilingual speaking students, literacy acquisition may produce personal conflict, by compelling the students to give up that home language in which they are already competent (Meier & Cazden, 1982). But by accepting and building on the language and narrative styles children

bring to school, teachers can provide experiences that are meaningful.

Implications for Policy

We have seen that knowledge and language are not learned in isolation, but as they are mediated through social interactions in an environment of people, goals, objects, events and activities. The purposes for action, the relationships among participants, and the particular roles people play, all influence the language and learning that occur. When techers seek to make classrooms more hospitable to all children they find that they must not only alter the curriculum, but also the way subjects are studied and the kinds personal relationships that exist between both peer groups and teachers. It requires that teachers structure and plan settings, that is, creative learning environments in which they encourage children to collaborate in exploring ideas, thus developing mathematical, scientific and literary concepts alongside social and linguistic skills. Time is needed for children to talk and discuss ideas with each other and their teachers so that they can reflect on, organize, and validate their growing knowledge. Opportunities should be made for them to represent their knowledge in a range of media - art, music, and drama, as well as in writing. When a wider range of learning procedures and means of representation are available, it is more likely that all children, whatever their cultural and linguistic backgrounds, will find opportunities compatible with their existing competence and interests.

Administrators have responsibility, too, to provide space, materials,

scheduling, and policies flexible enough to allow in-depth exploration of topics that are relevant to children's needs. School district policies should place value on creating rich learning environments, even though logistic arrangements, maybe somewhat more complicated and less comfortable that standard district textbook adoptions or rigid rules on conducting field trips. Further, district-wide policies on evaluation and testing should focus less on isolated skills and more on children's ability to use language in purposeful activities, such as speaking, and reading and writing a variety of meaningful texts.

Careful administrators ensure that the school welcomes and incorporates children's own experience and homelife, validates it, and makes it possible for them to bring their own knowledge for learning. In addition they should ensure that parents that parents are kept in touch with up-to-date knowledge of language and literacy and the way such knowledge is used in the school to ensure better - if different - opportunities for learning.

Both administrators and teachers need to keep their knowledge up-to-date, to become aware of, and know how to teach children from the many cultures now attending our schools. They need to recognize that school failure is often associated with the teacher's failure to understand the nature and function of spoken and written language for successful learning. School districts should have a policy whereby teachers are encouraged and supported in efforts to further their own knowledge of language, how it functions in education and the various cultural communities that make up the school population. This would be a step toward structuring the language arts curriculum from the perspective

of language functions and using the natural language of the child.

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